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RELIGIOWEST

Choosing Islam in West European societies -
an investigation of different concepts
of religious re-affiliation

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Abstract

Although different concepts regarding the analysis of the phenomenon of religious re-affiliation do exist, they are most of the time lumped together under the buzzword “conversion”, thereby conflating the nuances and social realities of the phenomenon and limiting this concept’s validity. Starting off from Richard V. Travisano’s differentiation between conversion and alternation and taking into account Arthur D. Nock’s concept of adhesion, this paper investigates different modes of change of religious affiliation. Drawing from Frauke Kurbacher’s conceptualization of what constitutes conviction, it re-assesses what is commonly understood as religious conversion through an analysis of different manifestations of re-affiliation with Islam in West European societies. The author juxtaposes converts to ‘reflexive Islam’ (who internalize their faith as a new system of belief in an individualized, cognitive process which leads to a broadening of their perspective and the strengthening of their self-identity as well as of their self-esteem and their agency) to youths who join groups which advocate Salafi interpretations of Islam (where role-taking within a collective identity is of particular importance) and those who engage in jihadism (where an us-against-them perspective becomes absolute). This includes an analysis of the re-affiliate’s motives and of the social implications of his or her choice. The aim of this paper is to refine an empirically based understanding of the concept of religious conversion through differentiating it from other forms of religious re-affiliation. Therefore, the paper will predominately focus on conversion, referring to alternation and adhesion as functionally different forms of religious re-affiliation to emphasize the differences between the different concepts and thus reduce the fuzziness of the term.

Keywords

Religious re-affiliation; conversion; alternation; adhesion; ‘reflexive Islam’; Salafism; jihadism.

I. Conversion – process or event?

The term “conversion” stems from the latin word *convertere*, which signifies a twisting movement or a movement that changes its direction.¹ Though it is often connotated to a dramatic and emotional religious experience with the Christian faith², the word is also used in non-religious contexts – for example, the admission offices of North American Universities speak of conversion rates with respect to how many potential students out of those that have been contacted subsequently apply to the university;³ in physics, the transition from one aggregate state to another is called conversion. Thus, the term implies a distinct change of a certain, well defined state or path to another – a high school graduate takes action to apply for a place at a university with the aim to enroll there as a student; an ice cube melts to a puddle of water; and a person who previously didn’t adhere to a specific religious concept becomes a believer respectively changes faith groups. All these states have a clear beginning and, most importantly, a clear end.⁴

When taking a closer look at religious conversion, it quickly becomes apparent that this understanding does not do justice to the phenomenon. Most of the different religious faith traditions do know and implement rites of passage from one – or no – religion to another one through the execution of a specific ritual, but these rites first and foremost constitute a formal avowal to the faith and do not necessarily reveal how much the change of affiliation impacts the new disciple on a cognitive, emotional and spiritual level and in his or her everyday life. It may be just a pragmatic decision to gain rights or benefits which those who do not belong to the faith group are exempt from; but it may as well be the result of a profound (spiritual) quest for meaning and orientation which may change the person’s whole perspective on life.

After more than a century of intensive research on religious conversion, scholars studying the phenomenon came to understand that it is much more complex than one might think at first sight. Meanwhile, many different definitions of the term conversion have been elaborated, leading to uncertainties of what the term actually signifies. Ethnologist Simon Coleman in consequence went so far as to say that “the word has no meaning as an analytical category because it cannot grasp the highly variable, syncretistic manner in which social identities and cultural styles are transformed in contexts of missions”, and thus has to be regarded a “fuzzy term”.⁵

The lack of precision of the term is reflected in the rather broad definition of Charles Farhadian and Lewis Rambo, two leading scholars in the study of religious conversion, who describe the phenomenon as “a religious change that is an ongoing complex process involving many different dimensions”.⁶ Farhadian and Rambo understand conversion as a process, not a specific event, thereby setting it apart from the popular image exemplified in the story of Paul the Apostle who according to the Bible is said to have found his faith in Jesus Christ through experiencing a moment of extreme distress when Jesus appeared to him while Saul – the name he went by before he converted – was

¹ Cf. Frank K. Flinn, “Conversion: Up From Evangelicalism or the pentecostal and charismatic experience”, in *Religious conversion: Contemporary practices and controversies*, ed. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb (London: Cassell, 1991): 51-74, 51.

² Cf. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb (1999). “Introduction. Conversion: Contours of controversy and commitment in a plural world”, in *ibid.*, 1-19.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, 15.

⁴ Cf. Virgil Gillespie, *The dynamics of religious conversion* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1991), 12-13.

⁵ Simon Coleman, “Continuous conversion? The Rhetoric, practice, and rhetorical practice of charismatic protestant conversion”, in *The anthropology of religious conversion*, ed. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 15-27, 17.

⁶ Charles E. Farhadian and Lewis R. Rambo, “Converting: Stages of religious change”, in *Religious conversion: Contemporary practices and controversies*, ed. Darrol Bryant and Christopher Lamb (London: Cassell, 1991): 23-34, 23.

traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus. This experience turned the fierce persecutor of Ur-Christendom to one of its first adherents. The concept of conversion as a “Damascus road experience” thus refers to a dramatic, instantaneous, life-changing epiphany. Arguing that this understanding of religious conversion is too simplistic and blocking the view on the variety of the phenomenon, Rambo concludes: “Perhaps the word *converting* [emphasis in original] better captures the phenomenology of the process”.⁷ Virgil Gillespie follows the same line of reasoning when he calls for a differentiation between the experience of converting and the event of conversion, pointing out that the formal act of conversion constitutes only one step within an experience continuum.⁸

II. Points of reference – inward or outward?

As re-affiliation to any religion whatsoever does not take place in a vacuum, but constitutes a product of the society the re-affiliating person lives in, his or her immediate social environment, and the individual’s character, the context within which the person re-affiliates is influencing the re-affiliation process as well as the motives for re-affiliating. Religious re-affiliation thus constitutes a multi-faceted and very complex phenomenon, with each re-affiliation brought about by a unique mix of influencing factors. Taking this into account, Rambo emphasizes that there is no ‘standard conversion type’, or profile of a ‘typical convert’, but rather a whole range of categories of converts who are all very different from one another.⁹ Yet, acknowledging the complexity of conversion processes does not yet render the concept less fuzzy. In an attempt to refine the term’s explanatory power through a re-conceptualization of its meaning, I turn back to Richard V. Travisano’s work in which he differentiates between conversion and alternation as different modes of change of one’s religious affiliation, and to Artur D. Nock’s concept of adhesion.

In Travisano’s understanding, conversion entails a change of the convert’s identity, whereas alternation signifies a change of roles. The precondition for internalizing a new system of belief is to understand it, which requires a certain amount of reasoning. To understand a system of beliefs means to be able to cognitively comprehend its rationality and inner coherency. The internalization of a system of belief is brought about by the reasoning-based acceptance that the system of belief in question is not only rational and coherent, but also valid. It thus transforms into a conviction. Following the definition of Frauke Kurbacher, I conceptualize conviction as a personal, intra-subjective phenomenon which binds the self-reference of an individual and its reference to the world to certain beliefs. Conviction is characterized by acts of thinking for oneself and self-enlightenment which includes cognitive, emotional and voluntative components.¹⁰ In short, it can be regarded as the degree to which one’s beliefs are rooted within one’s identity. Conviction and conversion are closely related, as the internalization of a new system of beliefs (or parts thereof) lead to a change in convictions that may prompt a person to convert.

When going through a process of alternation, i.e. a process of change of roles, the individual will streamline and synchronize his or her behavior and parlance according to the normative demands of the promoting agents of the religious or ideological dogmas who are exerting influence on the individual rather than to the religion or ideology itself; the identification with the set of belief is more superficial, as it is not internalized through reasoning and reflection. Unlike it is the case for a converting person, the effort of the alternating person does not so much pertain to developing the individual’s inward, spiritual dimension – i.e. his or her connection to a higher being –, but to implementing norms set out by an authoritative reference person or group, i.e. it is bound to an

⁷ Lewis E. Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion*” (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 7.

⁸ Cf. Gillespie “The dynamics of religious conversion, 18.

⁹ Cf. Rambo, “Understanding religious conversion”, 16.

¹⁰ Cf. Frauke Kurbacher, “Radikalität als Denkfigur. Zur Philosophie extremer Überzeugungen,” *Diskurse des Extremen* (2005), 49-60. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 50-52.

outward dimension. The focal point in this case is not so much a set of beliefs, but rather a set of norms. These norms function as a system of orientation provided by a collective identity.

Adhesion as conceptualized by Nock refers to the addition of a religious orientation to an already existing one. The result is what scholars today refer to as “religious bricolage”¹¹, a post-modern form of syncretism, which may possess features of conversion as well as adhesion.

III. Triggers for religious re-affiliation

Conversion and alternation do not only differ with respect to their point of reference, but also in their genesis. As has already been stated above, two factors play an important role: the societal context of the person converting / alternating and his or her social context.

Though because of the informal process of becoming Muslim – all that is necessary is to pronounce the *shahada*, the Islamic profession of faith, in front of two Muslims – it is impossible to generate concrete numbers, certain trends are palpable which seem to reflect the influence of certain factors for the choice to convert to Islam. Theologist Ali Köse suggested an increase of the number of British converts especially to Sufism in an empirical study, emphasizing Islam’s spiritual appeal.¹² The statement seems legitimate as it fits within the rising interest in and conversions to New Religious Movements (NRM) in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which possessed similar features to Sufism, focussing on spiritual awakening. The mix of inner contemplation, the development of a pronounced emotional relationship to a higher entity and the exoticism of Sufism were attractive for some of those with a need for transcendence and for breaking out of their conservative contexts. As for the 1980s, political scientist Alison Pargeter accounts the development of political Islam in the Middle East as the root of what she calls “a new breed of converts” who are reflecting this trend by taking on more politicized interpretations of Islam.¹³ Missionary activities of Wahhabi preachers of Saudi-Arabian provenance led to the spread of a very strict, literal interpretation of Islam in the 1990s, also among some New Muslims. Yet, conversions to Islam neither significantly increased at those times, nor were they given specific attention.¹⁴

As for Western Europe, this both changed in the 2000s due to two reasons: on the one hand the events of 9/11, on the other hand the increasing Muslim population. The temporal correlation of the 9/11 terrorist attacks carried out in the name of Islam and the rising number of conversions is neither a coincidence, nor to be understood as an endorsement of the bloodshed of that day, but in part a result of an interest in the alleged connection between Islam and terrorism. In a number of conversion narratives,¹⁵ the curiosity initiated by the (often very critical) examination of Islam constitutes a first

¹¹ Cf. Arthur D. Nock, *Conversion. The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander to Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933); Vassilis Saroglou, “Religious Bricolage as a Psychological Reality: Limits, Structures and Dynamics”, *Social Compass* 53.1 (2006): 109-115.

¹² Cf. Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London, New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996): 20; Ali Köse, “The journey from the secular to the sacred: Experiences of native British converts to Islam,” *Social Compass* 46.3 (1999): 301–312.

¹³ Cf. Alison Pargeter, *The new frontiers of jihad. Radical Islam in Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008): 168.

¹⁴ Milena Uhlmann, “Home and Belonging in a Semi-Diasporic Setting: Converts to ‘Reflexive Islam’ in West European Societies,” in ed. Kläger, F. & Stierstorfer, K., *Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging* (De Gruyter: Berlin/Boston, 2015): 207-226 (219).

¹⁵ A conversion narrative is an account of a conversion as told by the convert.

step on the path towards conversion,¹⁶ for example in the case of this lawyer in his mid-thirties who had converted to Islam in 2006:

“People talked a lot about Islam of course because of 9/11 and the media was anyways full of ‘Muslims’ and ‘Islam’ all the time. I found my way to Islam because this stirred an interest in me to just take a look at what this religion is about. Because I studied law, I am always keen to consult the original source, not secondary sources. So I bought a Quran, a Thora and a Bible, because I realized I talk a lot about religion but in fact I know nothing about it. I realized I had an opinion without having any clue what they [the religions] are about at all.”¹⁷

He stated to have had no aspiration at all to seek a religious affiliation for himself when he started to read into the three books, but found he couldn’t connect to neither the Torah nor the Bible because in his view, they were lacking topical reference to modern day life, whereas the Quran appealed to him because of its “wisdom”. He started to feel as if the book speaks to him, inspiring him to reflect about his life and his behavior. By the time he had finished reading it, he was convinced that it must be of divine origin, as he found that the Quran offers knowledge the people at the time it was revealed did not possess¹⁸ (this is often referred to as the “wonders of the Quran”). He was just as overwhelmed about his conclusion as he was irritated, since due to the negative sentiments he had held about Islam because of his upbringing, he would never have expected to feel attracted to this faith. Yet, he couldn’t ignore that his conviction in Islam was growing within him while he was reading, and when he had finished the book, he slowly started praying. After a period of about eight months, he took his *shahada* and thus formally converted.

The second main path to converting to Islam in the post 9/11 Western world starts through social contacts with Muslims. The 9/11 events amplified the already heightened interest in Islam within the non-Muslim majority societies of Western Europe. This curiosity was brought about by changing perspectives in public debates during the 1990s in which the categorization of persons with a migration background shifted from “foreigners” e.g. to “Turks” in Germany, “Arabs” in France or “Pakistanis” in Britain to “Muslims” in the 2000s. Previously ignored, the religious affiliation of immigrants has become a topic of special interest, usually in the context of what is framed as a ‘clash of civilizations’ between essentialized concepts of Muslim and non-Muslim culture.¹⁹ Although the debates about Islam and Muslims were (and still are) most of the time very negative and deficit-orientated, they bore witness of a growing Muslim population in West European countries and resulted in curiosity. As interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims has become more frequent, Islam is being introduced more and more by social contacts – an often very crucial factor contributing to the initiation of a conversion process, as exemplified by this office administrator who had converted in 2010 when he was in his beginning twenties:

“While I was in vocational training, we performed a role play during which I filled in a mock staff file, indicating I had no religion. One of my classmates who was Muslim saw this and asked me how it is possible to not have a religion. This was my first contact with Islam brought about by a Muslim. We often studied together and every time we ended up talking about Islam.”²⁰

¹⁶ Cf. Milena Uhlmann, Konversionen zum Islam und ihr gesellschaftlicher Kontext. Biographische Interviews deutscher Muslime. (Universität Potsdam: unpublished diploma thesis, 2006); Milena Uhlmann, Konversionen zum Islam in westeuropäischen Gesellschaften - Eine explorative Studie, forthcoming.

¹⁷ In an interview with the author in Berlin in August 2009.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The catchphrase of the “clash of civilizations” as coined by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington features cultural and religious “fault lines” between different civilizations which he regards to be “particularly prevalent between Muslims and non-Muslims.” (Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996): 207–210).

²⁰ In an interview with the author in Berlin in August 2011.

Notwithstanding the fact that this future convert had held negative preconceptions about Islam because of the association with terrorist attacks in the news, he accepted the reading materials his classmate handed him. After two years, he started taking Islamic classes at a local mosque to look deeper into the religious teachings and to see how he as a potential convert would be treated. Half a year later, he converted in that same mosque.

IV. Points of access and appeal – cognitive, emotive, pragmatic

What becomes apparent from these examples is the converts' pronounced cognitive access to Islam. Learning about the religion prior to taking the decision to convert is important to many converts, as they want to know what they might be getting into. For some, this process might even take years. Another pertinent characteristic of this prudent approach is its reflexivity: converts of this kind usually thoroughly scrutinize not only Islam, but also their own biography during this process of investigation and approximation, thereby developing a critical distance to both for the duration of this phase. At the same time, their approach is very individualized. The future converts work out their very own understanding and conceptualization of Islam and the meaning behind Islamic norms quite independently from other Muslims at a speed corresponding to their needs, i.e. not pushing themselves too much when a norm of conduct risks to overexert them, as it is for example often the case for most of the female converts regarding the use of the headscarf. As a result, they develop a high degree of ambiguity tolerance towards other interpretations of Islamic principles and norms. All along this process, they try to keep the ownership of their agency, so as not to let other Muslims take influence on the development of their personal understanding of the religion to more than a certain degree.

Next to being introduced to the faith over a rather intellectual path, also emotive components often unfold an appeal. The experience of the kindness of Muslim friends or acquaintances and the benevolence, solidarity and sense of community among Muslims are often contrasted to the egoism perceived to be prevalent in Western societies. For others, the aesthetics of Islamic culture or rituals, such as the beautiful calligraphy, majestic mosques or the exotic call to prayer may be the starting point on the path to embracing the religion.

All these different possibilities of approaching and gaining access to Islam on an intellectual as well as on an emotional level allows for the direct and personal experience of an "Islamic way of life" which provides a wholesome meaning, goal and direction. It reintegrates all the different, compartmentalized aspects of our postmodern lives and puts them into a coherent whole, kept together by the convert's spiritual relationship to god. For those who were believing Christians prior to their conversion, the logic and coherence of Islamic dogmas often plays a role, as they often perceive them as more compelling than those offered by Christianity, most notably the trinity, the divine sonship of Jesus and the original sin. It is this intellectual, emotional and transcendent satisfaction that makes Islam so appealing to Westerners, who through their conversion develop new perspectives on themselves and the social and societal contexts they live in. Transforming their socio-critical analysis to the individual level and thus themselves, the converts applied Islam as a tool to work on reducing their individual egoism and reform their own character.²¹

By working themselves through this reflected and reflexive process of conversion, the converts integrate their personal version of Islam into their individual realities – which is why I dub them converts to 'reflexive Islam'.²² This process of reordering and reorienting is radical in the sense that

²¹ Cf. Milena Uhlmann, "Home and Belonging in a Semi-Diasporic Setting," 223.

²² As the findings from my empirical research for my doctoral thesis on converts to Islam in Western Europe suggest, this kind of individualized contextualization of Islamic norms and dogmas has been gaining momentum. My sample consisted of 27 Berlin-, London- and Paris-based converts to Islam. Although not representative in a statistical sense, the cross-country comparative design of my study, drawing its respondents from different Muslim communities as well as interviewing persons not connected to one, points to a rather widespread diffusion of the perspectives, approaches and

the change is a profound and thoroughly thought through one, firmly enrooting the new convictions in the convert's self-identity. The concept of self-identity, developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens, emphasizes the conscious, reflexive element of identity construction by defining it as "the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her/his biography."⁸⁴ Identity construction thus involves the active interpretation of one's own biography as a "reflexively organized endeavor."⁸⁵ The process of conversion can, but usually actually does not, lead to a radical change in one's "universe of discourse" in a sense that it "entails the displacement of one universe of discourse by another",²³ as it is a widespread assumption. More often than not, the convert's post-conversional self-identity does not replace the pre-conversional one. The process of converting rather serves to further develop and thus refine the person's self-identity, thereby broadening, not retracting the convert's perspective on him- or herself as well as his or her social environment and societal context. The 'old' identity is not rejected, but integrated into the new universe of discourse – or rather, the other way around – and forms a vital part of it.

As stated above, a process of alternation, however, is not directed at this inward dimension of reforming one's self-identity and developing a spiritual bond to a higher entity, but oriented at an outward one – the goal of being part of a collective identity through the taking of a role predefined by a third party – and thus far more superficial.²⁴ The current phenomenon of 'conversions' of a number of West European youths to Salafism poses a good example. When taking a closer look at it, it appears that this phenomenon does not have so much to do with religious commitment and does not stem from spiritual needs, but rather from the need to belong and to feel significant. Authorities, academics and other experts observing Salafi milieus agree that for young people in search of orientation and a place to belong, Salafism can cater to a crucial emotional vacuum by fulfilling the need for a peer group which is offering them recognition and acceptance. Salafism takes on an "all-or-nothing" approach, categorizing the world and thus also human beings dichotomously into "good" and "bad." In the context of Western countries, Salafism thus serves as a means to delineate oneself from one's environment or social context of origin, to provoke majority society, and to provide a platform on which pre-existing feelings of aggression, deprivation and pomposity can be acted out. Salafism's new adherents are eager to fulfill the norms and rules of conduct as predefined by their respective Salafi peer groups from one day to the other and, by doing so, are seeking to empower themselves by the self-aggrandizement, self-delineation and self-stigmatization brought about by the powerful narratives²⁵ from which their collective identity is constructed. With its shock potential and high profile in the media and public discourse, Salafism offers the perfect tools to assure the desired effect.²⁶

This makes Salafism particularly attractive for marginalized groups and disrooted persons estranged from their social environment.²⁷ Rather than being interested in complex theological

(Contd.) _____

attitudes I described. In essence, the converts are thus practicing *ijtihad* – individual, sustainable (re-)interpretation of Islam through (self-)reflective reasoning.

²³ David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Convert as a Social Type," *Sociological Theory*, 1 (1983): 259-289, 265.

²⁴ Sociologist Manuel Castells concisely recapitulates : „(...) identities organize the meaning, while roles organize the functions“ (Manuel Castells, *The power of identity: The information age: Economy, society, and culture* (Vol. 2) West-Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011: 7.)

²⁵ Narratives are ways of explaining the word stemming from and referring to a certain system of beliefs. Although narratives incorporate pieces of ideological content and may cover a wide range of dictums, they are not integrated into a full and coherent ideological concept (cf. Ulrich Dovermann, "Narrative und Gegen-Narrative im Prozess von Radikalisierung und Deradikalisierung," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 29-31 (2013): 39-45, 41.)

²⁶ Cf. Milena Uhlmann, *Konversionen zum Islam in westeuropäischen Gesellschaften - Eine explorative Studie*, forthcoming; Milena Uhlmann, "Challenges and Possible Opportunities for Developing Effective Counter-narrative Measures to the "Islamic State" Movement", in ed. Jean-Luc Marret, J.-L. and Gonul Tol, *Understanding Deradicalization: Pathways to Enhance Transatlantic Common Perception and Practices* (Middle East Institute: Washington DC. June 2015): 1-17.

²⁷ Cf. Olivier Roy, *Der islamische Weg nach Westen* (München: Pantheon, 2006): 40-41, 253-257, 266-267.

discussions and arduous reflections about how to interpret Islam, make the effort to integrate it into one's pre-existing identity and adapt it to one's context, disoriented youth functionalize and instrumentalize Islam with the purpose of reducing the complex reality that they are exposed to, thereby whittling down their insecurities and enhancing their sense of self-worth by devaluating everyone who and everything that does not fit into their dichotomous thinking. The price of this exclusivist revaluation is actually a loss of agency, not a gain, as the behavioral norms the peer group imposes on the new group member are absolute and exempt from questioning. The perceived empowerment thus actually is a bluff. Such unreflected takeover of and submission under the imposed roles and norms of a third party does not result from conviction of a set of religious beliefs and hence does not qualify as conversion as it is conceptualized in this paper. What we are looking at is a youth subculture phenomenon much more than a religious one.

In contrast, in the context of Western societies, the motifs underlying the mode of religious re-affiliation termed by Nock as *adhesion* are mostly motivated by aiming at harmonizing the relationship to a person or social group or at resolving a conflictual situation, not at deliberately creating one. Adhesion is first and foremost characterized by pragmatism. It may be motivated for example by the aim to be able to marry a person of another faith group which's rules do not allow for interfaith marriages, or to gain access to certain material benefits which are limited to members of the faith – so called “rice bowl conversions”²⁸. The difference to a purely formal change of one's religious affiliation is that adhesion results in the mentioned religious bricolage, not indifference. In both cases, the initial motivation to re-affiliate oneself stems from wanting to obtain certain rights or resources, so the starting point may be the same, but the outcome is different – as shows the example of this yoga teacher in her beginning thirties who decided to become Muslim so as to please her future husband in 2010:

“I became a yogi and I love yoga and I love the whole yoga philosophy. And yoga is not a religion but it is very much a religion (...). It's wonderful. It's very energy-based giving, whatever path you're on is fine, it doesn't really matter. (...) I can't see any religion out there believing everything that I believe. And there wouldn't be, you know, some made up religion just for me. I think everyone has certain issues with certain aspects of religion. (...) I mean, there's nothing that's completely going to fulfill you and, say, yes, that is the word of god. (...) I'm a very strong believer in God and I'm very, very spiritual. I do not subscribe to one specific religion.”²⁹

She had stated to already have found her spiritual home in the yoga philosophy, but that she nonetheless wanted to take the step of embracing Islam serious in a sense that she would scrutinize the faith before doing so. She would only take on those precepts of Islam that would not run counter to the convictions she already held and adapt those Islamic principles that would pass the ‘test’ to her already existent set of beliefs. She thus found a workaround regarding the “certain aspects” of Islam she had problems with, but could at the same time fulfill her future husband's request to become a Muslim before they get married.

V. Consequences of religiously re-affiliating with Islam in Western Europe – social implications and reciprocal effects

However different the motives for religiously re-affiliating with Islam might be – the consequences that conversion, alternation and to some extent also adhesion bring about are quite similar. The perspective on Islam as well as Muslims in Western Europe is, as already mentioned, very negative and characterized by prejudices.³⁰ A 2009 study focussing specifically on German

²⁸ Bryant and Lamb, “Introduction”, 7.

²⁹ In an interview with the author in London in August 2010.

³⁰ Gert Pickel, *ReligionMonitor: Understanding Common Ground: An International Comparison of Religious Belief* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2013).

journalists' coverage of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam came to the following conclusions: converts to Islam were usually portrayed either as what the authors dubbed the "wild thorns frame", highlighting the convert's emotional hardships before or during his or her conversion, often referring to socio-economic problems, a broken family situation, low educational achievement, pre-conversion drug and alcohol abuse; within the "fifth column frame", focussing on a presumed national security risk posed by "fanaticized individuals who from their physiognomy look like 'us', but think totally different and decided to fight against their native society"; or using the "Islamophobia frame" which implicitly triggers fears of an 'Islamization' of European societies.³¹

The consequence of the negative perceptions and discourse is that those who choose Islam for whatever reason are most often looked at with suspicion and rejection. Hence, re-affiliating with Islam very often entails experiences of discrimination, as stated this employee of a funeral service in his end twenties who converted in 2003:

"(...) how did they say, a Bin Laden, this is a disciple of Bin Laden. (...) that was the time, like 2001, like 9/11 and that was... everyone who was with Islamic clothing, you were branded and really that was the time where you could feel the hate because before that, you lived in parallel, nobody was interested, but... the more and the shorter from each other these events happened, the more often you were at gun sight of everyone, the scape goat who was given the blame. (...). If you would be riding public transportation and reading the Quran (...) you were stared at and sometimes you would think, despite that the wagon is full, you had the space for yourself, four seats, nobody dared to sit next to you."³²

The recent, fast-growing phenomena of Western youths who are joining Salafi circles and those who sympathize with or pledge allegiance to the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) further aggravate the situation.

This kind of negative reaction is most often also experienced from the direct social entourage of those who choose Islam, i.e. his or her family members, friends and acquaintances, resulting in high social costs of the decision. Especially for parents it is hard to understand why their son or daughter would take this decision, up to the point where they feel personally attacked or betrayed by their child's conversion, as it was the case for this apprentice in the health sector in his early twenties who had converted in 2010 when he broke the news to his mother:

"For her, in fact, it was maybe a bit denying a bit the... my French side, that I wanted to become Arab, I don't know, that I... that I had denied God a bit, what they [the parents] had given to me. (...). I had started a little bit to talk about it [his conversion] to my parents, but it was a bit brutal for them, and my mother, she didn't accept at all, well, she did not at all manage to accept it. (...). She knew that I wanted to do ramadan and all, but, the night before the start of the fasting, she was in tears and everything, and I couldn't... in fact, I couldn't do it. (...). So I told myself I will leave it to the side a bit (...) because I sensed that it was complicated to practice [the religion]."³³

Converts to reflexive Islam are for the most part very eager to pursue their relationship to their social entourage in a positive manner. The relatives and friends of a person who converted are most of the time quite bewildered on account of their close one's decision to convert. One reason for this is the mentioned negative image of Islam and converts they have been exposed to and which they have internalized; the other reason is that conversion brings about a change of behavior that runs counter to some cultural practices in Western countries. Usually, the person in question stops to drink alcohol, abstains from pork and may in general be paying more attention to his or her food, so as to ensure he or she keeps to Islamic dietary norms. Whereas the convert's new 'pickiness' regarding food issues

³¹ Keren-Miriam Tamam & Milena Uhlmann, *How German Journalists Cover Converts to Islam. Who Are You – One of 'Us' or One of 'Them'?*, Working Paper 83/2009 (Jerusalem: Center for German Studies at the European Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem): 29-33.

³² In an interview with the author in Berlin in August 2011.

³³ In an interview with the author in Paris in November 2010.

may just seem annoying to those he or she shares meals with, abstaining from alcohol often constitutes a breaking point in the relationship between the converted person and his or her friends, since the consumption of alcohol plays a rather big role in the social contexts of Western societies. Female converts deciding to put on the headscarf usually are met with complete incomprehension. Often enough, the converted person's new emphasis on seriously engaging with religion already poses a big enough challenge to the religiously indifferent brought up in secular societies.

As for family relations, the initial estrangement often subsides after a phase of explanation and debates during which both sides have to exercise patience, as explained the young convert:

"I told her that (...) I will stay French, that I do not at all disavow the upbringing they [the parents] gave me, that they gave me a very good upbringing, so, I tried to explain her slowly but surely, but she is accepting it more and more. It's true that in the beginning, it was a bit a taboo subject at home. (...). I feel she is accepting it better and better now, because she sees that in my behavior... I am better than before, in fact."³⁴

As for friends, the 'wheat gets sorted from the chaff', depending on whether to not the friendship is regarded important enough for both parties to make an effort for mutual understanding and to seek out new leisure time activities that will be enjoyable for all.

Usually, converts take effort to 'heal' strained post-conversion relationships, especially those to their family, and to counter negative attitudes prevalent in their social environment by means of demonstrating their 'benevolence' in their daily interactions with non-Muslim majority society. By putting special attention to behave in a non-aggressive, empathic way and with the goal of reconciliation, they aim at abolishing or at least ameliorating what is perceived as a deplorable state of distance between Muslims and non-Muslims stemming from ignorance resulting in fear. With this effort usually comes a fair amount of frustration with the stereotyping, stigmatization and ignorance the converts are facing with respect to the more abstract public discourse as well as their immediate social environment.

Two common strategies to cope with this frustration are to either omit from these efforts at least intermittently or – and this is the more common case – to intensify their introspection and preoccupation with Islamic principles and norms so as to better be able to elaborate and explain them. At the same time, the steadfast dedication to values perceived as having a positive effect on society as a whole is emphasized. A side effect of this is a growing sensibilization towards the perceptions and the needs of their entourage and a stabilization of the convert's self-understanding and self-perception as a Muslim as well as the growth of his or her self-confidence, also stemming from the expansion of the respective individual's self-acquired expertise in Islamic matters.³⁵

Persons who alternate to a Salafi interpretation of Islam face more or less the same stereotypes and prejudices as do those who convert to 'reflexive Islam'. The difference between the two groups is how they deal with the resentment they are subjected to. Converts to 'reflexive Islam' try to reduce the frictions between themselves and other social groups, whereas the attraction of Salafi Islam for West European youths often stems from the deliberate escalation of the latent crisis. Their aim is to shock their environment and strike a rebellious pose, quite the opposite of reconciliation. Using the negative discourse in the media and the general public about Islam in general and Salafism in particular as a vehicle, they are staging their "exclusion of the excluded by the excluded"³⁶ and stylizing their 'victimhood', posing as society's boogey man. The attention they can be sure to receive makes them feel more significant. The self-delineation that serves as a means to this goal is a typical characteristic

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Cf. Milena Uhlmann, "Home and Belonging in a Semi-Diasporic Setting," 224-225.

³⁶ Manuel Castells, "*The power of identity*", 9. According to Castells, a resistance identity is build upon substantial criticism respectively rejection of certain dominant principles of a society and leads to a distinct self-separation of those ascribing themselves to the resistance identity.

of a collective resistance identity.³⁷ It serves to reinforce the coherency of a group and hence its potency. Alternation to Salafism thus draws its attraction first and foremost from the sense of belonging it offers to its new adherents, the clear-cut orientation it provides them with and the conflictual consequences of aligning with Salafism which its agents seek to exploit. Its dogmatism, strictness and the unambiguity of its norms is reflected in the scheme of dichotomous polarity with which Salafis categorize the world into “us” and “them”. Therefore, the coherency of the world view Salafism provides is fundamentally different from the one reflexive Islam has to offer. Whereas converts to the latter work out their perspective on life and the religion for themselves through a highly individualized conversion process, those who alternate to Salafism take on a framework of interpretation that is pretty much predefined.

VI. Western Europe’s new breed of jihadists – converts to terrorism?

The members of the German “Sauerland cell” Fritz Gelowicz and Daniel Martin Schneider who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), an offshoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) predominantly active in Central Asia, plotted an attack against Americans in Germany in September 2007; Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale who murdered British soldier Lee Rigby in plain daylight on the streets of Woolwich in May 2013; Italian Foreign Terrorist Fighter Giuliano Delnevo who died in May 2013 fighting for al-Nusra Front in Syria; the former rapper Denis Cuspert alias Deso Dogg, also known as Abou Maleeq or Abou Talha al-Almani who left his home town Berlin for Syria in the beginning of 2013 and became a member of IS, posing with severed heads; Amedy Coulibaly who killed five people in a kosher supermarket in Paris in January 2015, stating to have taken this action in the name of IS – these are some prominent examples of Western Europe’s new breed of jihadists who were not born Muslim. Moving on to an analysis of this most extreme re-affiliation with Islam, the question that arises is: why do those (often rather young) persons engage in terrorist acts, align with jihadist ideology and / or join terrorist groups like IJU, al-Nusra and IS? In the framework of this paper, it is not possible to elaborate on this complex question in detail. I will hence just focus on one observation.

As for the currently most notorious of these organization, i.e. IS, experts agree that many of the individuals drawn to this group seem to have radicalized over a rather short time-span.³⁸ Often, they do not possess a deep knowledge or understanding of Islam neither before nor during their radicalization.³⁹ It is thus rather probable that they did not internalize a full-fledged extremist ideology understood as “a systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture”,⁴⁰ as their radicalization process did not leave enough time for this cognitive process. At the same time, the vision IS proposes is not particularly complex. Hence, it is likely that the attraction of IS does not so much originate from a profound intellectual appeal, but rather an emotional one, similar to the appeal of Salafi Islam. A major difference is that non-jihadi Salafis are satisfied with the nimbus of belonging to a group of outcast ‘enfants terribles’, adapting the collective identity provided by their new peer group and witnessing the shocked reactions of their social and societal environment whereas this is insufficient in fulfilling the need for attention and significance for those engaging in terrorism.⁴¹

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ Cf. Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria* (New York: The Soufan Group, 2014): 16. Given the lack of precision of the term radicalization and the absence of a widely agreed-upon definition which would reflect a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, researcher Amélie Boukhobza prefers to speak of “jihadization” in this context (cf. Amélie Boukhobza, *Jouissances jihadistes: genèse d'une Haine-Intellectuelle* (2015), PhD thesis manuscript).

³⁹ Cf. Peter R. Neumann, “De Portsmouth au califat, itinéraires de djihadistes britanniques.”, *Le Figaro*, (September 1, 2014). <http://www.lefigaro.fr/mon-figaro/2014/09/01/10001-20140901ARTFIG00257-de-portsmouth-a-l-etat-islamique-itinéraires-de-djihadistes-britanniques.php>.

⁴⁰ Merriam Webster, “Ideology.” (2014), <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ideology>.

⁴¹ Cf. Uhlmann, “Challenges and Possible Opportunities”.

Through the sacralization and romantization of terrorist acts executed in the name of Islam, jihadists have created an eschatology of martyrdom supported by a “jihadist anti-culture” in which the dichotomous “us-against-them” perspective offered by Salafism becomes absolute.⁴² The brutal absolutism of jihadi ideology and the pretension of being master of life and death ought to resonate within a person who is inclined to fantasies of omnipotency and will thus be more attractive for a narcissistic character than a person searching for spirituality – the first claiming to be executing a higher being's will as its tool, the latter seeking transcendence.

VII. Final remarks

The aim of this paper was to investigate the differences between three main concepts of religious re-affiliation – conversion, alternation and adhesion – and how they relate to Islam in the context of West European secularized societies. As the realities of social phenomena are always more complex and fluid than the theories which aim at displaying and explaining them, these concepts and thus this paper should be regarded as an aid to understand general trends in the mentioned specific contexts rather than a clear-cut, exclusive and definite categorization of persons who religiously re-affiliate.

Certainly, there are religious re-affiliates who are convinced of Salafism's precepts from a religious point of view and who develop a spiritual bond to a transcendent entity; in such case, the outward dimension, i.e. the youth subculture element and the attraction of a collective resistance identity plays a less important role. The same goes for a number of persons who go on to join what they understand as religiously legitimated, compulsory jihad. In the understanding of this paper, these people would thus qualify as converts, as they meet the conceptual prerequisite of internalizing a religious set of beliefs through growing conviction of *religious* contents of Salafi or jihadi ideology. Yet, those who internalize Salafi or jihadist interpretations of Islam significantly limit the ‘maneuvering space’ within which they can develop their self-identity because of the strictness and rigidity of the religious and ideological concepts they convert to. Though they might have come to their extreme beliefs through a process of reflection, they are lacking the reflexiveness of those converts presented in this paper as converts to reflexive Islam. The persons in question might do biographic work by scrutinizing their pre-conversional life while going through a process of conversion, but since their understanding of Islam is inflexible and inextricably linked to a collective identity, they very quickly come to the limits of their agency. If anything, Salafism's young adherents first and foremost convert to norm obsession – and those who take on jihadism to absolute narcissism.

We are only at the beginning of sorting out the specificities of alternating respectively converting to a Salafi or jihadi way of life respectively ideology. At the moment, we are lacking sufficient empirical data to refine a conceptualization of the phenomena. In-depth, structured research is necessary to gain a more extensive and comprehensive understanding about the different kinds of mechanisms and motivations underlying the subtleties of these functionally different modes of re-affiliating with an extreme interpretation of Islam. What has to be kept in mind when investigating these phenomena is that focussing solely on the extreme cases of those who align themselves with Salafi or jihadi groups does not do justice to the complexity and manifoldness of the phenomenon of re-affiliation with Islam. The first step to come to a differentiated analysis is to first of all acknowledge the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon of religious re-affiliation in general.

⁴² Cf. Asiem El Difraoui, *Al-Qaida par l'image. La prophétie du martyr* (Paris: PUF, 2013); Asiem El Difraoui, “Islamistische Medien: Vom Wahhabismus über die Muslimbrüder zum Cyber-Jihad,” in ed. Asiem El Difraoui and Carola Richter, *Arabische Medien* (Konstanz: uvk, 2015): 117-128.

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